

Vulnerable children – briefing

Revolving Door Part 1: Are vulnerable children being overlooked?

About

From before they are born until their twenties, Action for Children helps disadvantaged children across the UK. We improve the lives of 370,000 children, young people, parents and carers every year by doing what's right, doing what's needed, and doing what works for children.

Summary

We are concerned that **up to 140,000 vulnerable children** referred to social services for concerns including abuse and neglect are not getting help because their needs do not meet the threshold for statutory support, and early help is not available. If we miss an opportunity to act early and provide appropriate support, some children risk being caught in a 'revolving door' into children's services, repeatedly referred and assessed but not receiving help.

Ongoing **local authority budget cuts** and **central government cuts to early help funding**, have made it increasingly difficult for local authorities to provide early help services, especially in a context of increasing need in communities.

We are calling on the Government to **strengthen the statutory framework** for early help services and **provide adequate funding** so local authorities can provide help as soon as children need it.

Identifying the problem

Without early help, vulnerable children risk being left in limbo. When an assessment does not lead to help, an opportunity to act early is missed. Although these children do not reach statutory thresholds, they are still likely to be vulnerable. We found that common needs are domestic violence, neglect, physical abuse, parental mental health and substance misuse.

Ongoing chronic neglect has negative impacts on children. Not only will it make a child's life miserable, it can affect all aspects of their development and the relationships they make throughout their lives. Without help, some children's situations could escalate, placing them at risk of harm. Recent research from the Department for Education shows that half of children referred to children's services in 2010-11 were re-referred at least once by 2016.

Unlike other populations of vulnerable children, we know about each child referred to children's services who has then proceeded to assessment. Based on a Freedom of Information request sent to all 152 local authorities, we found that 184,500 children's needs assessments were closed as 'no further action' in 2015-16, as they did not meet the threshold for social care. Of these, only around one in four families were referred on to early help services such as children's centres or domestic violence programmes, leaving an estimated 140,000 children without any follow-up support.

The big picture

There has been a 124% rise in the number of enquiries where a child may be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm over the last ten years. Yet, by 2020, government funding for early help will have fallen by 71% compared to 2010 and estimates suggest that a £2 billion funding gap to support children will have emerged.

Financial pressures make prioritising early help over statutory obligations – such as child protection and support for children in need – hard for local authorities. Limited resourcing and greater need can manifest as difficulties accessing social care support for children where concerns exist.

Children’s centres have shut at a rate of six per month since January 2010. There have also been reductions in teenage pregnancy services, short breaks for families of disabled children, and other types of family support services. This means less support to meet the needs of children below statutory thresholds before their problems reach crisis point.

Beyond resourcing

Our research suggests significant variation in how local systems record children who have had contact with social care, but are not currently regarded as ‘in need’ or receiving support. While local data is valuable to better direct services to local need, a country-wide picture of the response to children below statutory thresholds is needed.

It is not always clear who should do what, and when, to help children and families address problems early. Ofsted has found the roles and responsibilities of individual agencies for early help provision are often unclear. Schools, GPs and others who work with children and families do not always see the practical ways they can help children beyond referral to children’s social care services.

What needs to be done?

Policy and legislative frameworks need strengthening to help children below statutory thresholds, removing incentives to focus on statutory services at the expense of early help. Local authorities currently have more flexibility to manage spending over early help services because there are no statutory requirements outlining the type or extent of services that should be in place.

- The Munro Review recommended introducing of a duty on local authorities and their statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of early help services.
- There have been calls to revisit Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 as a mechanism for securing early help; the large number of vulnerable children not reaching the ‘child in need’ threshold questions the continued appropriateness of Section 17 thresholds.
- There is an opportunity in the Children and Social Work Act to recognise that children’s needs are not static. The regulations required to implement the Act should make clear that the scope of new safeguarding arrangements must include early help as well as child protection.

Strengthening the statutory framework for early help needs to be supported by adequate funding. Combined, these measures would ensure that help is available for children at all levels of need, which should in turn reduce the pressure on statutory services.

Recommendations

Ensuring that vulnerable children receive the help they need is an urgent and achievable goal. We are therefore urging the Government to take action by:

- strengthening statutory frameworks for early help and ensuring adequate resourcing
- urgently addressing the funding crisis for children’s social care
- ensuring proposed mental health reforms and Domestic Violence Bill include a focus on parents and address the impact of these issues on their children
- ensuring the Children and Social Work Act Regulations cover early help

We are also calling on local authorities to collect, and make effective use of, data on the response to children’s needs post-assessment to better direct support to vulnerable children and families. This should include children who fall below the threshold for statutory support.

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